

John Cleese's new film has brutality, lust, sadism . . . all the elements of comedy

JOHN CLEESE says his new film, *A Fish Called Wanda*, is about "that most blessed of non-events — an English love story".

"The very contradiction in terms presents a challenge which no man of spirit could resist," he says. "You could liken it to making a film about a road safety campaign in Greece or a social worker in South Africa."

Wanda, in which Cleese co-stars with his old Monty Python cohort Michael Palin and Americans Jamie Lee Curtis and Kevin Kline, has suddenly made the gangling comedian a sex symbol and the hottest British star in Hollywood.

He also wrote the film and co-directed it with 77-year-old Charles Crichton (*The Lavender Hill Mob*) and convinced MGM to back the \$7 million project before the studio had even seen a script.

Cleese put a sizeable chunk of his own money into the film, too, enabling him to maintain artistic control. It was a gamble which has paid off handsomely.

"I did not want MGM deciding on the cast, who would direct it and what the script would be," Cleese says.

He chose Kevin Kline — "He is, quite simply, the only great actor I know" — and went after Jamie Lee Curtis after seeing a video of *Trading Places*, the comedy in which she co-starred with Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd.

"I saw in her a wonderfully facile comedy actress with a great body! I had never seen her before, but I



Fish and quips!

knew that I wanted her — as *Wanda*. It was perhaps the most important piece of casting I have ever made," Cleese says.

"The love story between me — a rather stiff English barrister named Archie — and this American thief (Jamie) who is a

totally free and independent spirit is the emotional heart of the movie.

"I had never played a love scene before or even been in a love story. And it was very difficult because Jamie didn't want to rehearse anything!

"She had listened to a lot of what I had to say about comedy tech-

● John Cleese with Jamie Lee Curtis . . . "I had never seen her before, but I knew I wanted her — as *Wanda*."

niques, but when it came to love she was far more experienced than me!

"Jamie said to me, 'If we don't

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rehearse much, the romantic scenes will work better on the fact that they will have more spontaneity, charm — a little real life about them!

"I am a compulsive rehearser, so it was rather frightening. But Jamie was right. Tender moments we had on camera had that spontaneity that makes an audience feel we really do like each other — which we do, of course!"

Cleese, who has made a career out of being laughed at in public, reveals that his family name was changed from Cheese — his father did not wish to be laughed at when he joined the British Army in 1915.

Now, he says, he often reverts to the old name when he telephones restaurant bookings.

"Cheese is more memorable and easier to be heard and understood," he says matter of factly. "Cleese doesn't sound like anything the first time, so if you use it on the phone you're already into a conversation."

"When I phone an Italian restaurant I say I'm Signor Formaggio or Monsieur Fromage at a French restaurant. If I want to eat Chinese, I'll say it is Mister Creese."

The creator of the Ministry of Silly Walks and Basil Fawlty says his height — he's a towering 196cm — led him into comedy in the first place.

"No one will believe this, but at prep school I was quite badly bullied; I was a rather elongated bullied object," he says.

"People who play comedy are flawed men. As an only child and not a very good mixer, the breakthrough for me to popularity and being accepted by my peers was an

● John Cleese in a rather uncomfortable position in *A Fish Called Wanda*.

ability to make them laugh."

So how has this typical middle-class Englishman who once resembled a giant stick insect managed to get America's women drooling over him?

The basic secret was for Cleese to stop being so English!

He explains: "Being English has been an embarrassment to me in many ways. I am so English on the surface, but deep down there's a bit of me that does not feel English at all.

"Although I have behaved in the same way, I disliked all that correct behavior, stuffiness and emotional distance.

"I suppose my style of humor enabled me to escape briefly from the heavy inhibitions and conditioning of the English."

His hang-ups about England surface in *Wanda*.

In one scene he says to Jamie Lee: "Wanda, do you have any idea what it's like being English? I have this dread of doing the wrong thing... of saying to someone, 'Are you married?' or asking her if she has children and being told they all burned to death on Wednesday. I'm embarrassed. That's why we English are so dead."

Now Cleese says: "If that sounds more like a heart-felt cry than a gag, it is! I found it very interesting and easy to put into my character's mouth some of my own feelings about being English."

Cleese did not manage to start freeing himself of his negative English attitudes until his first marriage broke down and he agreed to be psycho-analysed. And the therapy enabled him to head for Hollywood stardom.

John explains: "My wife Connie Booth, who wrote *Fawlty Towers* with me and played Polly, is American and did not have the fear of psycho-therapy that British people have.

"So when our marriage got in big trouble we went to group ther-

apy. The therapists were Robin Skinner and his wife Pru.

"Therapy gave me mental freedom. I became able to show my soft, vulnerable side instead of the English stiff upper lip and I became much more relaxed."

Cleese spent the next 10 years trying to learn as much as possible about psycho-therapy.

And he ended up writing a best-seller with Robin Skinner, who became a close friend.

The book is called *Family And How To Survive It*.

From David Bromfield and David Lewin in London

